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I want to begin by saying this is a fine book that belongs in the collection of any scholar interested in East Asian Buddhism. The field has been dominated by studies of Buddhism in China and Japan, and despite the fact that Korea sits squarely between these two regions and often served as the connective tissue between them, studies in Korean Buddhism have been sadly lacking. Every competent study of this neglected topic should be received with gratitude.

Still, I have some reservations about this book. As a specialist in the study of Pure Land Buddhism, I wanted to welcome it as a needed addition to that field as well. However, I found myself puzzled at several junctures, and I think the source of my confusion can be seen in two sentences, one from the beginning of the book and one from the end.

On the first page of chapter 1, the author says: “The purposes of this book are to explore the development of Pure Land Buddhism in the early Korean state of Silla 新羅 (ca. 300-935) and to call attention to active Korean participation in a shared Sinitic Buddhist intellectual discourse in medieval East Asia” (p. 1). The “Final Reflections” section of the last chapter begins with this: “The fundamental difference between the Pure Land traditions in China and Japan and that of Korea is that in Korea there never was any semblance of an independent or sectarian tradition at any time” (p. 126). I am unsure what to make of a book that sets out to explore a phenomenon and concludes that it does not exist. We will return to this issue after summarizing the chapters.

Chapter 1 sets the stage by examining the ways in which Koreans adopted and adapted Chinese Buddhism. McBride complicates our picture by stating, first, that nationality did not play a role in Buddhists’ self-perception (“Buddhist[s] … in medieval East Asia did not think of themselves as being Korean, Chinese, or Japanese Buddhists”), and second, that Koreans did not uncritically assimilate Chinese Buddhism, but that it was “more selective and was met with greater resistance from the hereditary elites than usually recognized” (p. 2). He goes on to say that the prevalence of the Japanese model of Pure Land as a separate sect, which has dominated Western understandings until recently, distorts our picture of the development of the Amitabha cult in Korea, and he notes that native exegetes developed their own ideas on the topic in the sixth and seventh centuries. Seeking to overcome misunderstandings of Korean Buddhism stemming from the Japanese occupation of the early twentieth century, he states that this book will show the interrelatedness of sūtra exegesis and cultic practices in Korean Pure Land. The introduction ends by inviting the reader to see the exegetes whose texts will loom large in this study
as scholars trying to understand the mass of newly available Buddhist texts, including those dealing with Amitābha, as parts of a Mahāyāna guide to the bodhisattva path and not as sectarian apologies.

The second chapter examines the early roots of Pure Land thought in China. Surveying such a broad topic in fifteen pages would be challenging under any circumstances, and the presentation feels a bit disjointed and at times left me wondering why this or that piece of information was being presented. The purpose was most clear when the author explained that a text or trend of thought played an influential role in Korea. The results here explain why Korean Pure Land thought followed its own distinctive path. Jingying Huiyuan淨影慧遠 and Tanluan曇鸞 influenced thinkers like Wǒnhyo, while Daochuo道綽 and Shandao善導 did not. The chapter concludes by saying that the Silla exegetes were familiar with the writings of Tanluan, Shandao, and Huaigan, and that they were just becoming aware that some in China were beginning to teach niànfo念佛 as vocal recitation.

Chapter 3, on the practices of Silla Pure Land, is the strongest in the book, and most amply demonstrates McBride’s contention that Silla exegetical traditions diverge from those of China to chart their own course. He presents Wŏnhyo’s resolution of contradictions between the Pure Land sūtras and his organization of practices into those of meditation, faith, and esoteric levels in fine detail. Wŏnhyo, however, thought that the “ten recollections” done orally was an inferior practice leading to lower rebirth in the Pure Land (p. 43). The chapter maps out the ways in which other Silla monks, Pŏbwŏ and Hyŏnil, differentiated various forms of the “ten recollections” and explained the practice’s effects. The chapter concludes with the interpretations of the more conservative monk Kyŏnghŭng, who rejected Huaigan’s (and thus Shandao’s) acceptance of ten oral invocations of Amitābha’s name as anything but a practice for those of inferior capacities. The material in this chapter is quite complex and rooted in scriptural exegesis, and so I will leave off my summary here.

The next chapter deals with the relationship between the cults of Amitābha and Maitreya in the Silla kingdom. Through his presentation of many scripture citations and even folktales, the author shows that, in contrast with China, no competition ever arose between the two cults in Silla.

Chapter 5, “The Amitābha Cult in Practice,” begins with an important summary statement: “Pure Land Buddhism never developed into a separate tradition, sect, or independent school in Silla. The veneration of Amitābha and the performance of practices and rituals in expectation of rebirth in Sukhāvatī ... completely integrated with other forms of mainstream practice and other Buddhist cults common in Silla, such as the chanting of dhāraṇi, the cult of the buddhas of the four directions, and Silla’s dominant Hwaŏm tradition” (p. 78). The first section surveys stone monuments featuring Amitābha in various locations, either grouped within the traditional Pure Land triad or among the buddhas of the other three directions. The next section, on ritual and dhāraṇi, describes “spell sūtras” containing mantras for rebirth in the Pure Land. Against other scholars, McBride argues that these do not represent a synthesis of Pure Land and esoteric Buddhism, citing evidence largely drawn from earlier Chinese materials. The next section examines votive inscriptions, revealing two things: (1) Silla patrons and aristocrats did not clearly distinguish Amitābha and rebirth in Sukhāvatī from other buddhas and goals, and (2) Amitābha was blended into the list of other deities and figures from the Huayan Sūtra華嚴經, showing again the fusion of the cult of Amitābha into the Hwaŏm tradition. The following section on literary narratives is interesting in that it shows that, through the eighth century, practices that scholars have long associated with Pure Land such as the sixteen visualizations of the Contemplation Sūtra and oral recitation of the name of Amitābha to attain rebirth in the Pure Land spread among the
common people, and the author recounts stories of commoners and slaves who practiced successfully. A final section outlines effects that developments in Silla had later in Japan.

The epilogue states the author’s conclusion that Silla exegetes preferred to think of yömbul 念佛 as a serious meditative practice suited to those of superior capacities, though they were willing to concede that simple oral invocation of the Buddha’s name could transport ordinary people to rebirth in the Pure Land, though at an inferior level. Intellectually, the practice remained within a Hwaŏm framework, and as practice shifted away from meditation and into vocalization, it was identified with dhāraṇī practice. After a brief consideration of Korean influence in Japanese practice, the book ends with the author’s final reflections.

Let me return to the conundrum with which I began this review. How to understand a book that purports to be about Pure Land Buddhism but concludes there is no “Pure Land Buddhism” as a separate tradition or institution? I present the following not as rebuttals of the author’s position or conclusions, but as a further discussion of issues raised in the book. I hope this venue will offer Dr. McBride an opportunity to respond.

I think the author’s point would have been clearer if he had provided a working definition of “Pure Land Buddhism” at the outset, because the problem seems to be one of equivocation. I infer from the discussion that in this book, the term “Pure Land Buddhism” refers to any practice, text, commentary, or work of art that has to do with the Buddha Amitābha or points toward rebirth in Sukhāvatī. What is being denied is that this ever spun off from the Buddhist religion as a separate stream. Without a definition or explanation, however, it is difficult to tell for certain what the author is affirming or denying. The book itself raises one possible way to address this issue when it refers, not to “Pure Land Buddhism,” but the “Cult of Amitābha.” Differentiating these as two separate subjects may provide more conceptual clarity.

“Pure Land Buddhism,” I suggest, should refer only to a tradition that holds that non-elite practitioners should be able to attain rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitābha, that this Pure Land is preferable to all others, that this practice gives the greatest assurance of success, that oral invocation of Amitābha’s name is sufficient to attain this goal, and that articulates reasons why it works. It should have something to say about the relationship of self-power to other-power, and provide defenses against detractors. As noted in the chapter summaries, it seems that in the period under discussion, people did engage in such a practice, but the author does not elaborate on them. The terms “self-power” and “other-power” only appear once in the book (pp. 41-42), and characteristic terms such as “power of the original vow” 本願力 (Ch. benyüuanli; K. ponwořolyŏ), easy practice 易行 (Ch. yixing; K. yihaeng), and dharma-gate 法門 (Ch. famen, K. pŏmmun) do not feature in this book, even though the texts it examines do contain them.[1]

In contrast, we could use the phrase “cult of Amitābha” to designate all other rituals and practices involving this buddha. On this understanding, the book would be primarily about the cult of Amitābha. While “Pure Land Buddhism” appears here and there in its pages, as when it mentions ordinary people practicing yömbul to gain rebirth, the book largely leaves this topic unelaborated. Even if the elite exegetes central to this book disparaged this as an inferior practice, it seems they still admitted that those who engaged it achieved rebirth in Sukhāvatī. Given that, according to the Pure Land sūtras, even an inferior rebirth constitutes final escape from suffering and the promise of buddhahood, one wonders how Wŏnhyo and others explained its inferiority or undesirability. How did they explain the superiority of their meditative practices?
I could also take issue with the statement that no “tradition” of Pure Land existed even at this time. The author makes clear that some people were orally invoking the name of Amitābha hoping for rebirth. Someone had to teach them to do this and explain why it would work. A tradition can exist without taking concrete form as a social formation such as a sect or a denomination. It only requires a body of theory and practice passed along through informal channels to endure.

And while this book is focused on the Silla period only, I would also like to know how something that had no separate existence became one of the “Three Gates” (sammaun 三門) system of practice in Chosŏn monasteries alongside meditation and doctrinal study.[2] How did the practice of yoṁbul become so deeply entrenched that even a new religion such as Won Buddhism felt the need to begin services with extended periods of vocal invocation?

In sum, this book is mainly concerned with the cult of Amitābha as seen in art, meditative practices, and the works of exeges who positioned it within a Huayan/Hwaŏn doctrinal framework. A nascent Pure Land tradition makes brief appearances in stories about non-elite practitioners of yoṁbul and elite authors who disparaged such practices as inferior. While it seems clear that such a tradition does indeed exist, the book leaves it largely unexplored.

Let me repeat: This book is a fine contribution to the field of Pure Land studies and Korean Buddhist studies. It should be clear, however, that there is much more work for scholars to do, and the enterprise would benefit from a clear statement of what does and does not constitute “Pure Land Buddhism.”

Notes

[1]. See Wŏnhyo’s 般護  Muryangsu-gyŏnɡ  yŏnũi  sulmunch’an 無量壽經義要文贊, T37n1748_p0153a28-163a07 on self-power and T37n1748_p0155c24-25, T37n1748_p0156c14-17, and T37n1748_p0160b19-20 on “power of the original vow,” and T37n1748_p0163c13-15 on “easy practice.”

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